

President Zelenski, religion and Orthodox Churches

HRWF (24.04.2019) - Volodymyr Zelenski, who has just been elected president of Ukraine, is a Jew. How will he deal with religious issues in Ukraine, in particular with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) in communion with the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople? Some have analyzed his declarations during the election campaign and are sharing their expectations and their views.

New Ukrainian president has ambiguous relationship with church

[Religiia v Ukraine, 22 April 2019](#)

Stetson (22.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2URS1ul> - Vladimir Zelensky, who was elected president of Ukraine on 21 April 2019, informed voters on the eve of the election that he thinks well of the tomos about autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and he considers it not only President Petro Poroshenko's achievement, Religiia v Ukraine reports.

During the debate with Poroshenko in the Olympic stadium on 19 April, Zelensky literally declared (in translation from Ukrainian): "As regards the tomos, this is a victory for Ukraine. But it seems to me that this is a victory primarily of Filaret, who fought for the Ukrainian church back before you became president. Back in the time when you were a parishioner of the Moscow patriarchate."

Earlier, on 4 April, an advisor to Zelensky for legal matters, Irina Venediktova, stated at a press conference: "Ukraine is a secular state, but for our self-identity the receipt of the tomos was most important. Therefore these are things on which nobody will encroach but will support by all possible means that the state has. The state cannot tread on the territory of sacred religious things, but it is obligated to protect them. Vladimir Zelensky will do everything in order to protect this mighty achievement."

Despite this, on the day of the election, 21 April, without awaiting the counting of votes, UPTsMP Metropolitan of Zaporozhe Luka, who earlier threatened the head of the Novonikolaev district state administration with a curse for his support of autocephaly and campaigned against Poroshenko, published on the official website of the diocese congratulations to Zelensky for "an undoubted victory in the presidential election," and he assured him of "prayerful intercession."

In his congratulations published on 22 April, the head of the UPTsMP, Metropolitan Onufrey, also says to Zelensky: "Your stated priorities for the development of the country coincide with the hopes and aspirations of our people."

Meanwhile, observers earlier explained "why Zelensky is frightening for Orthodoxy." In an interview with RBK-Ukraine on 17 April, Vladimir Zelensky confirmed that he is a loyal supporter of abortions and the legalization of marijuana, prostitution, and gambling. (tr. by PDS, posted 22 April 2019)

Patriarch Kirill: Zelensky given historic chance to unite people of Ukraine

Interfax-Religion (22.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ZDBRDA> - Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia has congratulated Vladimir Zelensky on his election as president of Ukraine and hopes that under his rule, the canonical Church will stop being persecuted.

"The people of Ukraine that supported your candidacy are pinning big hopes on you for positive changes in their lives. You are being given a historic chance to unite the nation and make a personal contribution to resolving economic and social problems in the

country, and to finding ways to overcome the existing conflicts and splits," the patriarch said in his address to Zelensky published by the press service of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Patriarch Kirill said he believes that the only possible way to ensure that the state system works effectively toward making life better for the people will be "cooperation of all well-intentioned powers in society, with their full involvement in a nationwide dialogue."

In his address to Zelensky, Patriarch Kirill expressed sincere hope for an end to "the sad period" of harassment and discrimination against Ukrainian citizens belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

"May the merciful God help you in your good affairs and undertakings, and give you wisdom and make you firm in your future endeavors for the good of the Ukrainian people," Patriarch Kirill said in his letter to the Ukrainian president-elect.

Zelensky won the presidential election in the second round on April 21 with 73% of the vote, while his rival, incumbent head of state Pyotr Poroshenko gained slightly over 24%.

What the Orthodox should expect from Zelensky (By Kirill Aleksandrov) - Excerpts

Union of Orthodox Journalists (23.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GBWEzF> - If we analyze the words and facts known today, we can make an unequivocal conclusion: Vladimir Zelensky has never declared his sympathy for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Instead, he spoke very positively about the OCU. Let us cite a quote from his debate with Poroshenko at the Olympic NSC on April 19:

"Concerning the Tomos. This is a victory for Ukraine but it seems to me that this is a victory, first of all, for Filaret, who had fought for the Ukrainian Church even before you (Petro Poroshenko – Ed.) became the president. Back in the days when you were a parishioner of the Moscow Patriarchate."

The following messages can be read in this short statement:

- Tomos is a victory for Ukraine. Tomos is assessed positively and therefore, everything associated with Tomos is assessed positively: both the OCU, Filaret Denisenko, Epiphany Dumenko, unlawful transfers of the UOC temples to the OCU, and the infringement of the rights of believers of the canonical Church, etc;
- Tomos is Filaret's victory. Filaret, therefore, is not a schismatic, not the culprit of the hostility and lawlessness in the religious sphere but an honored person for Ukraine;
- The struggle of Filaret for Tomos, which really has a long history, is also evaluated positively.
- To be a parishioner of the Moscow Patriarchate (i.e. the UOC) is a direct reproach toward Poroshenko. Consequently, belonging to the UOC is evaluated negatively; otherwise, it would not be possible to reproach anyone.

Irina Venediktova, Zelensky's advisor, also expressed sympathy for the OCU: *"Tomos is the most important thing for our self-identity. Therefore, these are things which no one will not only encroach but will support with all the capacity that the state has."*

Of course, one should not exaggerate all these statements but the fact remains: the Ze-team expresses sympathy for the Tomos but not for the UOC.

The factor of businessman Igor Kolomoisky also testifies to the general mood against the UOC under the new government. We will not repeat Poroshenko's election mantra that Zelensky is a puppet of Kolomoisky. However, it is undoubted that with the victory of Zelensky, the influence of Kolomoisky on the policy of Ukraine and on the state of affairs in general will increase significantly. And if you remember that the main mouthpiece of Kolomoisky, the TV channel "1 + 1", is the channel that most of all slings mud at the UOC, it becomes quite obvious that the new government will favor the schismatics and treat the UOC badly.

But a much more important question than the way the new government is going to treat various confessions is the question – what the new government is going to do, what its policy in the religious sphere is going to be. Here we can assume the following.

Firstly, the new government will pay much less attention to religion than Poroshenko's team. Zelensky will be faced with much more urgent tasks, on which he will have to concentrate first of all. (...)

All this simply will not allow Zelensky to continue the religious policy of his predecessor with the same intensity. And for Poroshenko himself, this whole venture with the Tomos was basically a pre-election technology. And this technology, admittedly, failed. The grantee of the Tomos, Petro Poroshenko, who was put by Phanar on a par with the holy Prince Vladimir the Great, the Baptist of Russia, lost miserably to the comedian Zelensky, the clown in Old Russian terminology. Vladimir Zelensky seems not that stupid not to take Poroshenko's mistakes into account. Intervention in church affairs does not push up a rating. Now the elections being over, no one really needs all this hubbub around the Tomos and the creation of the new religious structure.

Therefore, with a high degree of probability, the pressure on the UOC will weaken. The central government will no longer send directives to places demanding the transfer of the UOC communities to the OCU. The theme of the transferring the Ukrainian Lavras to the dissenters will also lose its relevance. Zelensky will be just busy with other concerns. Although active supporters of the OCU may try to continue the persecution of the UOC with the tacit consent of the new government but the second factor will play against it.

Secondly, for V. Zelensky himself, the issue of religion is a matter more personal than public or state. In an interview with RBC-Ukraine, he said, *"There are things that we never discuss at the table of our family. My father taught me so. I never discuss them with anyone. The issue of religion is number one. We never discuss things that split families and society. I never do that. But I believe in God."*

If Zelensky truly understands that state intervention in the affairs of religious organizations splits society, then he is unlikely to welcome such interference. As a president, he will be interested in the elimination of any conflicts within the state, not in their escalation. Moreover, "hands-off" approach to the religious sphere responds to his inner convictions.

Another positive response, which was heard in an interview with RBC-Ukraine, was the answer to the question about demonstrative visits of divine services on major religious holidays, which all previous presidents practiced. Zelensky said that he was not going to attend churches "on camera": *"I think this is my personal, internal affair. I do not want to broadcast this to the whole world. Because my conversation with God I prefer to have one-on-one."*

This is welcome. Perhaps, the demonstration tour of the presidential couple to the churches of various denominations will finally end, followed by counting the minutes that the head of state and his wife spent in a particular temple.

Thirdly, Zelensky positions himself as a true European. So, he will, or at least try, to implement European values in Ukraine: human rights, rule of law, independent legal proceedings, democracy, etc.

It can be assumed that under President Zelensky, there will be less lawlessness in the religious sphere. The courts will decide in favor of the UOC communities, the police will investigate incidents of violence against believers, etc. And all this will happen not because Zelensky will support the UOC but because all the actions of the authorities in relation to the UOC under Petro Poroshenko were not just lawless, but outspokenly lawless. And when Poroshenko still had full presidential power, heads of territorial communities, heads of local state administrations, and law enforcement officials still violated the law to please the President and his team.

But it was only for Zelensky to gain twice as many votes as Poroshenko in the first round of the presidential election, as it became clear that there was practically no chance for the latter to remain in the chair of the head of state. So, it became pointless for officials to violate the law for the benefit of the Tomos-grantee Poroshenko. (...)

All this opens up a window of opportunity for the UOC. Taking advantage of the lack of motivation for officials to violate the law, one can try to get through the courts or by submitting complaints to the state administration bodies to restore the violated rights to freedom of religion. It is possible that after a while this window will close. This can happen if President Zelensky appoints people to government posts who will strive to destroy the UOC and drive everyone into a single pseudo-religious organization – the OCU.

We repeat that today's decisions of the courts in favor of the UOC are not connected with the support of the Church by the new government (there is no such support), but because the actions of the authorities under President Poroshenko were overtly and unambiguously illegal.

Thus, the question "what should the Orthodox expect from President Zelensky?" can be answered like this: the attitude anticipated is negative rather than positive, but the actions are legal rather than illegal. In any case, the Church should not rely on the state and seek its support. The Church must rely on its own inner spiritual foundation. *"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that is laid, which is Jesus Christ"* (1 Cor. 3, 11).

But the Church, of course, has the right to demand that the state observe the norms of its own laws and the Constitution regarding the rights of believers. The time will tell how it will be exercised by the new government, while the Orthodox now have more important things to do: the Church is living through the Passion Week, preparing to prayerfully experience the last days of the earthly life of our Lord Jesus Christ and to celebrate the Bright Feast of His Resurrection.